

VERMONT AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-711

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642-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

VERMONT AVENUE

HABS No. DC-711

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Location: Vermont Avenue begins at the northeast corner of Lafayette Square at H Street and Madison Place and extends northeast to the historic city boundary at Florida Avenue near Ninth and V streets, NW.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks and the planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia Department of Public Works. McPherson Square, Thomas and Logan circles, and several smaller reservations are maintained by the National Park Service; medians and the rest of the small reservations are managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: The blocks between Lafayette Square and Logan Circle are heavily used by downtown traffic, while the blocks north of Logan Circle support angle parking and serve mainly local traffic.

Significance: Vermont Avenue has developed along the lines of L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city. Although he probably planned for it to continue beyond the historic city boundary, Vermont Avenue ends at Florida Avenue and therefore remains a relatively quiet thoroughfare. It traverses two National Register of Historic Places Historic Districts; the 15th Street Financial District and the Logan Circle Historic District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.

2. Alterations and additions:

1872: Roadway paved with concrete from H to M streets, NW.

1940: Underpass and traffic islands constructed to redirect traffic around Thomas Circle.

1950s: Northbound and southbound lanes channelized between R and U streets.

B. Historical Context:

According to Pierre L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city, this avenue is one of four that radiate from the White House. Originating at President's Park, this avenue proceeds northeast at 29 degrees through a rectangular open space between I and K streets (See McPherson Square--HABS No. DC-680). It then intersects with Massachusetts Avenue at a yellow-shaded intersection marked No. 9 (See Thomas Circle--HABS No. DC-687). A large triangular-shaped open space was created by its intersection with Rhode Island Avenue (See Logan Circle--HABS No. DC-399) before its termination at the city boundary. Dotted lines emanating from this point suggest that L'Enfant intended the roadway to extend beyond the city limits. Andrew Ellicott's plan of 1792 maintains the same path, although the angle of the avenue has been steepened to 25 degrees northwest, and L'Enfant's

yellow shading was omitted from Thomas Circle.

Vermont Avenue ran through two tracts of land patented to John Peerce in 1687, the southern portion known as Port Royal and the northern section called Jamaica. When the original proprietors donated the portions of their land that fell within the planned avenues in 1791, Peerce's grandson, Edward, owned the portion of Port Royal crossed by the southern end of Vermont Avenue, and John Waring owned the portion traversed by the avenue's northern segment. Both tracts were purchased by speculators in 1791; Samuel Davidson purchased Port Royal and Samuel Blodgett purchased Jamaica.¹

Due to its proximity to the White House, the south end of the avenue between Lafayette Square and Logan Circle developed throughout the nineteenth century as a fashionable residential area, while the northern reaches of the roadway were undeveloped until the turn of the century. The 1857-61 Boschke map shows buildings scattered along the avenue between Lafayette and Farragut squares. North of Logan Circle the map indicates several farm buildings within the government-owned right-of-way indicating that the roadway was uncleared.

The Civil War was a major turning point for the entire city, and development of Vermont Avenue was affected by its aftermath. Soon after the Army Corps of Engineers took over the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, (OPB&G) in 1867, Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Michler described the condition of the avenue writing, "Vermont Avenue is a fine broad one leading direct from the President's House to the environs of the city, and should be opened its entire length. Its position makes it one of the grandest streets of the city."² Since the southernmost blocks of the avenue, around Lafayette Square had developed in the early nineteenth century, Lafayette Park was one the first parks to be landscaped, and the first asphalt in the city was reputedly laid on Vermont Avenue on the block Lafayette Park and I Street. It was installed at the request of Theophile Roessle, manager of the Arlington Hotel on the corner of Vermont Avenue and I Street from 1868 to 1912, to insure quiet passage in front of the hotel for the comfort of his guests.³

Farther north, a venerable brick home that had presided over the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue since the 1840s was joined by several other buildings in the 1860s, and in 1869, Montgomery Meigs chose a site at Vermont and N Street to build his Italian Renaissance Revival mansion in a region far removed from the urban core.⁴ North of N Street, the avenue ran through land known throughout the nineteenth century as Blodgett's Wilderness Tract because of its undeveloped state. After the Civil War, freed slaves began to populate this region building frame houses in a random fashion.

In 1871, responsibility for the improvement of the city's avenues was transferred from the OPB&G to the local jurisdiction of the Board of Public Works, formed under the new territorial government. The board began a whirlwind of public works throughout the city, paving the streets, laying sidewalks

¹ McNeil, 42, 50.

² Annual Report . . ., 1868.

³ Goode, Capital Losses, 177.

⁴ Goode, Capital Losses, 72.

and planting trees along them. As roadbeds were graded and paved the oddly shaped open spaces at their intersections--circles, squares, triangles, and trapezoids--remained the responsibility of the OPB&G. Orville E. Babcock, who had replaced Michler in the OPB&G was a close friend of Alexander Shepherd, the controversial head of the Board of Public Works, and the two worked in concert on many efforts to improve the city.

By 1872, the board had paved Vermont Avenue with concrete from the north side of Lafayette Square to the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and lined it with maple trees. The paved roadway continued through the center of the large intersection between I and K streets, despite Michler's earlier request to create a rectangular park there. At Massachusetts Avenue, however, the roadway was diverted to form a traffic circle in accordance with Ellicott's plan. The OPB&G created landscaped parks at both of these intersections, a sodded pair of triangles at K Street and a circular park in the center of the traffic circle at M Street. Although the avenue was not yet paved between M and P streets, Rhode Island Avenue had been paved with wood to the P Street intersection and the circle at the intersection with Vermont Avenue was also improved. The OPB&G erected lamps, a fountain, and planted trees in this park called Iowa Circle.

Unfortunately, in its haste, the board did not always perform quality work, and much of it had to be redone in ensuing years. On Vermont Avenue, Congress had selected the square between I and K streets as the site of a statue honoring Civil War Hero James B. McPherson, and when it was erected in the center of the park in 1876, the Vermont Avenue roadway had to be torn up. At the circle at Massachusetts Avenue, all of the plants that were set in place in 1871 died because the packed soil from the former roadway had not been removed and the plants could not grow with just a few inches of soil.⁵

As a result of shoddy work, mismanagement of funds, and allegations of corruption, the territorial government lost its charter in 1874, but its initial improvements had encouraged investment in the city. As development spread north the population increased along the paved portion of Vermont Avenue and beyond. The first luxury apartment building in Washington was built in 1879 on Vermont Avenue, on the south side of the circle at Massachusetts Avenue; the same year a statue was erected in the circle to honor Maj. Gen. George Thomas. McPherson Square and Thomas Circle continued to be occupied by Washington's elite, while fashionable town houses lined the blocks between these hubs. By the 1880s, elegant houses were being built around Iowa Circle, which began to rival the circles to the south.

Middle-class row houses were built along the avenue throughout the remainder of the century, and in 1880 the Garnet School was built at 10th and U streets for neighborhood black children; it was joined by the adjacent Patterson School in 1893, to meet the needs of the growing population. By 1895, Vermont Avenue was paved with asphalt from Lafayette Square to T Street. The majority of the smaller reservations along the avenue had also been improved by 1894, if not by the OPB&G then by the occupants of neighboring lots. The two northernmost blocks of the avenue remained unpaved into the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century, the south end of the avenue became the site of office and commercial structures, and as property values increased, the smaller residences were replaced by large office buildings that maximize the square

⁵ Annual Report . . ., 1872, 7.

footage permissible for their sites. The Veteran's Administration building, erected during World War I on the site of the Arlington Hotel, for instance, rose to a height of 130'. McPherson Square and Thomas Circle are now surrounded by massive, modern offices and hotels, with the exception of two large churches on Thomas Circle--Luther Place Memorial Methodist Church, which dates to the 1860s, and the National City Christian Church designed by John Russell Pope in 1930. As a result of the growing commercialization of the southern end of the avenue, traffic increased and created bottlenecks at the large intersections. An underpass and rechannelization islands were installed at Thomas Circle in 1940, and a program to further aid traffic through channelization on the avenue began around 1950. As part of this program, at least three of the triangular reservations north of Logan Circle were bisected and reconfigured in an effort to create more efficient traffic patterns.

The neighborhood surrounding Logan Circle, so named in 1901 after the erection of an equestrian statue of Civil War hero, Gen. John A. Logan, has remained largely intact since it was first developed. In the early twentieth century, Logan Circle became increasingly populated by prominent African American political and social figures. The National Council of Negro Women, for instance, occupied 1318 Vermont Avenue, south of Logan Circle, from 1943-66. Founded by leader and educator Mary McLeod Bethune, the council headquarters have recently been designated as a National Historic Landmark.

Unlike its counterpart, Connecticut Avenue, Vermont Avenue was never extended beyond the city boundaries and as a result never became a major thoroughfare. While Connecticut Avenue has always prospered because of its proximity to major commuting routes, the northern reaches of Vermont Avenue remained isolated. After the Depression, this northerly segment of the avenue declined, and many of the homes lining it were broken up into apartments. The Logan Circle area became a notorious bastion of crime and prostitution. Meanwhile, in more prosperous areas such as along Connecticut Avenue, the buildings were torn down to be replaced with more profitable high-rise structures. Thus through neglect, these buildings were preserved, and in the last several decades, many have been revitalized and restored since the area was designated as a National Historic District in 1972. Since this designation, the National Park Service has removed the roadways that sliced Logan Circle into "a lemon flanked by two bananas" to restore the park to its original circular shape.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: From building line to building line, the avenue is 130' wide.
2. Length within city limits: All of the approximately 1.5-mile-long avenue is within the historic boundaries of the city.

B. Elements within right of way:

1. Roadway: Between Lafayette and McPherson squares, the avenue supports two lanes each of two-way traffic with angle parking on the southbound side. North of McPherson Square, two-way, two-lane traffic continues to Thomas Circle where through traffic is segregated to the outer loop around

the Thomas Statue; northbound traffic on the east side and southbound traffic on the west. The block north of Logan Circle supports two lanes of one-way north-bound traffic with angle parking on the west side of the street. A narrow concrete median begins in the block south of R Street, and at the R Street intersection northbound and southbound traffic is separated by a sodded wedge. The same configuration continues at the next two intersections. Traffic signals are located on the raised medians.

2. Sidewalks and street trees: The area between the roadway and building lines features sidewalks running the full length of the avenue. The block between Lafayette and McPherson squares is paved with concrete from the building line to the curb. In the two blocks between McPherson Square and Thomas Circle, the area between the curb and building line is entirely paved with concrete, with tree cuts with flowers evenly spaced in a double row within the wide sidewalk. The segment between Thomas Circle and Q Street features street trees planted in a sodded strip between the curb and sidewalk. There are no street trees north of R Street, but there are planted yards between the building line and sidewalk.
3. Major reservations:
 - a. The avenue originates at 15th and H streets on the northeast side of Lafayette Square, Reservation No. 10 (See HABS No DC-676).
 - b. Between I and K streets, the avenue is diverted around McPherson Square, Reservation No. 11 (See HABS No. DC-680).
 - c. At its intersection with Massachusetts Avenue, 14th and M streets, Vermont Avenue traffic is diverted counter clockwise around Thomas Circle, Reservation No. 66 (See HABS No DC-687).
 - d. At its intersection with Rhode Island Avenue, 13th and P streets, Vermont Avenue is diverted counter clockwise around Logan Circle, Reservation No. 153 (See HABS No. DC-339).
4. Smaller reservations: The following list describes the locations of the reservations identified along this avenue by 1894, the date they were first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement, if known, and a description of historical and current appearance as of summer 1990. Unless otherwise noted, they are under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (NPS).
 - a. Reservation No. 161: East of the avenue, south of Thomas Circle, at 14th Street, NW. Formerly a landscaped park abutting City Square No. 215, this reservation has been pared down to a concrete median and traffic island.
 - b. Reservation No. 162: West of the avenue, east of 14th Street, north of Thomas Circle, NW (807 square feet). This sodded triangle abuts City Square No. 244, the site of Luther Memorial Church. It is surrounded by quarter-round coping and concrete perimeter

sidewalks and features a small flower bed surrounded by a low, metal picket fence. Single steps on each side of the park lead up to a concrete and exposed-aggregate path. A statue of Martin Luther erected in the 1890s stands in front of the church, although it is not on park property.

- c. Reservation No. 163: East of the avenue, west of 13th Street, north of O Street, NW (5,112 square feet). This freestanding reservation located south of Logan Circle was first improved with a post-and-chain fence, trees, and shrubs around the time the large circle was first landscaped in 1872. It now features a landscape design dating to the 1968 beautification program endorsed by Ladybird Johnson similar to that in Reservation No. 154 on the east side of the circle. Its asymmetrical plan features a path and terrace of patterned concrete and exposed aggregate with round tree planters of varying sizes. Round concrete benches and tulip-type trash cans are grouped about the park.
- d. Reservation No. 164: West of the avenue, east of 13th Street, north of Logan Circle, NW (1,018 square feet). Although this reservation abutting City Square No. S277 was recognized as federal property as early as 1872, it was enclosed by occupants of the house on the abutting square before the turn of the century until finally in the 1910s, the abutting residents were granted a permit to legally do so. On April 17, 1956 (Land Record 206), it was formally transferred to the jurisdiction of the District of Columbia. Today this small, well-tended plot is delineated from the brick perimeter sidewalks by rectangular coping and is entirely surrounded by an ornamental iron fence that probably dates to the 1890s.
- e. Reservation No. 165: East of the avenue, west of Twelfth Street, NW (1,058 square feet). This reservation abutting City Square No. N278 was officially identified in 1884 and was roughly graded and enclosed with a wood fence by 1894. Today the sodded triangle is surrounded by a chain-link fence and is delineated from the brick perimeter sidewalks with quarter-round coping.
- f. Reservation No. 681: East of Vermont Avenue, west of Twelfth Street, south of R Street, NW (577 square feet). This reservation was transferred from the roadway to the National Park Service August, 30, 1950, as part of an effort to ease traffic by channeling it through the park. A sodded triangle, it is delineated from City Square No. 309 by a concrete sidewalk. It features a large shade tree and a row of thick wood posts to prevent vehicle trespass.
- g. Reservation No. 166: West of the avenue, east of Twelfth Street, north of R Street, NW (1,148 square feet). Officially identified in 1887, this reservation was roughly graded in grass by 1894. In 1940 it was transferred to the D. C. Commissioners and was transferred in part back to the NPS in 1957. All of it was alienated to D. C. January 28, 1963. The reservation is now encompassed by a school

yard.

- h. Reservation No. 682: East of the avenue, west of Eleventh Street, south of S Street, NW (2,941 square feet). This freestanding sodded triangle was transferred from the roadway to the National Park Service August 30, 1950, as part of an effort to ease traffic by channeling it through the park. It is surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks and features several shade trees.
- i. Reservation No. 167: East of the avenue, west of Eleventh Street, NW. (427 square feet). Officially identified in 1884, this reservation was used since the turn of the century by the abutting property owner in City Square No. 308. It was transferred to the D. C. Commissioners in 1939 in an effort to enlarge the intersection to ease traffic. Part of it was returned to the National Park Service May 16, 1951. Now, the irregularly shaped reservation is surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks and is partially coped with quarter-round concrete.
- j. Reservation No. 683: West of the avenue, east of Eleventh Street, north of S Street, NW (2,728 square feet). This freestanding reservation is a triangle attached to a median. It was created through a transfer from the roadway to the National Park Service August 30, 1950, as part of an effort to channelize traffic on Eleventh Street. It is now surrounded by concrete perimeter sidewalks and features a bus stop on the east side.
- k. Reservation No. 168: West of the avenue, east of Eleventh Street, NW. Officially identified in 1884, this reservation abutting City Square No. N334 was described in 1902 as being maintained by the owner of the abutting property. It was transferred to D. C. July 19, 1939, and is still an open space used by the owner of the adjacent property as a yard.
- l. Reservation No. 169: East of the avenue, east and west of Tenth Street, south of T Street, NW. Officially identified in 1872, this reservation abutting City Square No. 334 was enclosed and improved in the 1890s by the owner of the adjoining house. It is now divided into two sections by Tenth Street. The west section abuts City Square No. 334, and the east section now abuts City Square No. 362. Both have been landscaped similarly, being paved over with elevated planted areas approached by concrete risers. Paving atop these elevated areas consists of large round stones.
- m. Reservation No. 170: West of the avenue, east of Tenth Street, south of U Street, NW. Officially identified in 1884, this reservation was graded and enclosed by a post-and-chain fence by 1894. It was first reduced in size when U Street was widened in 1906. And was further decreased by land transfers in the 1950s. Today, the southernmost tip of this supposedly 10,973-square foot reservation is sodded and surrounded by concrete perimeter

sidewalks. Currently the U Street-Cardozo Metro station is under construction on the northern portion of the reservation.

5. Front yards: On the three southernmost blocks, except where hedges have been planted along the watertables of several buildings, the sidewalk fills the entire space between the building lines and roadway. North of Thomas Circle, the scale of buildings is smaller and the sidewalks are narrower, allowing for small front yards between the building lines and sidewalk. For the most part, these are enclosed and tended by the adjacent building occupants.
- C. Framing elements: South of Thomas Circle, the avenue is framed by maximum-height office buildings and hotels. North of the circle, it is mostly flanked by a continuous line of three- and four-story residences. Since many of these date to the nineteenth century, they feature bays and oriels that protrude into the right-of-way, as was permissible with a permit after the 1870s.
- D. Vistas: Vermont Avenue connects four major parks, each with equestrian statues, that provide reciprocal vistas along the avenue from almost any point.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

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B. Early Views:

1927-29: Survey photographs of each reservation (photographs of the reservations under NPS jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation

Files; photographs of the reservations transferred to D.C. are in the HSW Reservations Collection.

C. Bibliography:

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1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.